

July 30, 2017

Songs In the Key of Life*
(with acknowledgments to Stevie Wonder)

Psalm 24

In the Hebrew text, the Psalm's first word, "Lord" begins a prepositional phrase that designates possession. "The Lord's is the earth." This puts God first -literally- and eliminates any question of ownership, sovereignty or power.

The Lord is not subject to the earth. The earth and all who dwell on it are subjects of the Lord. The Lord owns the world, so says the Psalm, because it is the Lord's work. To live in the world is to be dependent upon the reign of God.

Today we'll have a hymn sing- and rightly so. Often times in Bibles, the heading for Psalm 24 is something like 'a Psalm of ascent', or words to that effect. Whether these words were sung in ancient times, or even how (accompanied with tambourines?), may be up for debate, but that it is now part of our ongoing repertoire for worship can't be debated. We know this as hymn #93, "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates." (Sing first verse?)

Some words about this Psalm are necessary. The Psalm is made up of three sections. In just a few brief words, the Psalmist (presumably David, one way or the other) proclaims the Lord's power and sovereignty over chaos, symbolized by setting the creation OVER the seas and the rivers. The ancient Hebrews were not sea people. They feared and did not understand the great waters. The Creator of the earth is not a part of creation, not a product of nature, but the sovereign, the governor of all- whether above or below.

The Psalm then moves to the Ascent part, beginning with a brief examination of the worthiness of the participants... Who is worthy to make this ascent? The terms 'clean' and 'pure' don't belong to the Hebrew vocabulary of ritual purification rites, but are rather ethical terms. "Clean hands" are those innocent of wrong against others. A 'pure heart' follows the ways of the Lord, and not selfish or vindictive ways. These qualifications weren't used as a checklist to be applied to those lining up for the walk up the hill of the Lord- but were instructions, liturgically, to be read as part of worship. They redirected worshippers' minds and hearts to the King of Glory.

The purpose of worship, ancient and modern alike, is to seek blessing and

righteousness. Blessing is a holy gift of support and encouragement. Righteousness is inspiration, and guidance to do the right thing.

Worship guides us to recognize the relationship between creator and created- humbly, honestly and thankfully, that we are made in God's image, of the same stuff of the heavens, by a Creator who knows what is good for us all.

I've titled this sermon after a Stevie Wonder album (yes, vinyl!)- from 1976. It is his best -acknowledged by many reviewers.... and is still available, of course, on iTunes. The album came back to me as I was thinking about doing a Hymn sing. During my college days, there was a semester when I don't think another album was laid upon my turntable (and no other 8-track found it's way into my dashboard player in my Ford Mustang, either.) The album is an anthology of Stevie Wonder's best, of a journey of his life- ups and downs, downs & outs, beauty & ugliness, soaring & soulful.

"Isn't She Lovely", "Knocks Me off My Feet", "Sir Duke," the hits just keep on coming.

So, what are those songs for you? .. that speak to your life... that signal special moments, special memories, special times?

What are "Songs of approach" that come to your mind— as you experience life?- They happen in different places, in different times... in our contemporary American society,

I think about sports, in particular- and baseball, now that it's in season... It happens during the 7th inning stretch- "Take me out to the Ball Game" (except at the Phillies— Harry Kalas' favorite—'High Hopes") & of course at Camden Yards— 'Thank God I'm a Country Boy."

What is the music played as you approach M&T Bank Stadium on Raven's Game Day? (We Are the Champions?)

Of course, for us here- what I'm really getting are songs of faith what are those songs for you?

perhaps as you walk to church ... on Xmas Eve. (is it Silent Night?)
as you anticipate the beginning of a wedding? (the wedding march)
at the Baptism of an infant?- Sicilian Mariners

at a funeral for a dear one?- For All the Saints...

What are those hymns with meaning???

I want to conclude words that aren't my own, but from someone who I've been reading a lot this summer- as my devotional reading...

* Bishop Steven Charleston- comes from a family with a long history of service in the Native American community and the Episcopal Church. His great-grandfather and grandfather were both ordained pastors who preached in their native language in rural communities throughout Oklahoma. Following in their footsteps, Steven was ordained at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. He was national director for Native American ministries in the Episcopal Church, professor of Systematic Theology at Luther Seminary, Bishop of Alaska and Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Today there are over 10,000 people who read his daily meditations on Facebook and more around the world who read his books through RED MOON PUBLICATIONS.

He writes – about the Songs of our lives, and our ascent to the Lord, step by step- in whatever ways we choose to take them...

... the price of our admission into the sanctuary of the Spirit is our willingness to be transformed. It is our willingness to enter into mystery and become part of it. For some of us, that price is too high. It doesn't make sense. We don't want to give up our choice of reality, our understanding of who we are in the pecking order of life and the job descriptions we have assigned ourselves to.

Cashing in our privileges in order to chase an unseen force into a wilderness of questions is just too much to ask. But, whether we like it or not, that is what transformation requires: it means letting go of who we think we are in order to become what we never expected we could be. Sanctuary is the place of transformation. The Spirit is the agent of transformation. Song can be our vehicle, in whatever fashion we choose to sing it. Our part is to enter the mystery, let go, and become.

So- Let us sing, let go, and praise God with our voices. Amen.